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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002000

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: In meeting with SA DAS Camp, Prime Minister reflects on troubled cohabitation situation

Refs: (A) Colombo - SA/INS 10/25/02 fax

- (B) FBIS Reston Va DTG 250042Z Oct 02
- (C) Colombo 1989, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In an October 24 meeting with SA DAS Camp and Ambassador Wills, PM Wickremesinghe was none too optimistic about the cohabitation situation, indicating that the GSL had tried to work with the president to no avail, so far. The PM did not show his cards on what the GSL planned to do vis-a-vis the president. For her part, President Kumaratunga went on TV last night to address the nation. She staked out a moderate position on cohabitation, but seemed skeptical of the GSL's peace initiative. Although the political situation remains volatile, both sides seem to be treading very carefully for the moment. END SUMMARY.

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PM: Not Optimistic re Cohabitation
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2. (C) SA DAS Camp and Ambassador Wills met with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe on October 25. Asked about the troubled cohabitation situation (see Ref C), the PM remarked that his government had tried hard to work with President Kumaratunga to no avail, so far. The GSL, for example, had stopped some prosecutions of her supporters as a good will gesture. She was also welcome to participate in cabinet meetings, but she refused to attend. She had also failed to fill certain positions, which was causing problems for the smooth functioning of the government. It was also not fully clear whether or not she supported the government's peace initiative. She had put herself in position where she could play the "spoiler" role if she wanted. (Note: See Kumaratunga's recent skeptical comments about the GSL's peace initiative in Para 6 below.)

3. (C) Queried about the GSL's next steps, Wickremesinghe replied that the government had basically dropped the idea of trying to pass its "19th" amendment to the constitution. (Note: In a ruling earlier this week, the Supreme Court basically made it extremely difficult for the government to proceed with the proposed amendment, which was crafted by the GSL to rein in executive powers to call parliamentary elections -- See Ref C.) It did not seem likely that the president would call an election because she knew her party would not do well, he asserted. The government was considering taking steps to slash the budget of the president's office, but all options were still under review. DAS Camp urged the PM to try to make cohabitation work so that the GSL could continue to focus on important peace process issues.

4. (C) Concerning the recent spike in tensions in the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) threatening the GSL's majority in Parliament, the prime minister said it was basically an internal SLMC matter that would fade away. The issue that had most disturbed the group of rebel SLMC MPs was the continued activities of the Tamil Tigers against the Muslim community in the east. The Tigers' actions had essentially helped spark Muslim militancy. It was critical that the Tigers stopped extorting funds from Muslims and abducting them on occasion. In any case, the PM continued, he was meeting with the head of the rebel SLMC faction, A.L.M. Athaullah, today, and hoped to be able to calm the situation down. (Note: The rest of DAS Camp's meetings will be reported Septel, including additional comments by the PM.)

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President's Speech
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5. (SBU) For her part, President Kumaratunga went on TV

last night to address the nation (text is contained in Ref A). In the somewhat rambling speech, which was delivered in English, she staked out a relatively moderate position on cohabitation, calling for an end to partisan infighting. On this point, after elaborating how she had tried to make cohabitation work, she stated:

"It is now time to put the past behind us. The petty political bickering which has been the bane of our political culture must now be confined to the pages of history. As your head of state and president, it is my responsibility to bring together all communities and all conflicting political parties."

16. (SBU) Kumaratunga was skeptical about the GSL's peace initiative. She first noted that she fully supported the government's objective of realizing peace for Sri Lanka. She went on to underscore, however, that she did not believe that the Tigers were holding up their part of the bargain, stating:

"Seven major incidents of violence have occurred in the Eastern Province and have caused serious problems to the Muslim people and in some instances to the Sinhalese community living in the east. The civilian population...is facing continued problems of extortion, kidnap, punishments meted out by an unlawful judicial system and recruitment into an illegal police force and an equally unlawful military force by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)."

Kumaratunga urged the GSL to respond to these LTTE actions by developing "a clear vision and a policy framework" regarding the peace process. "The government owes this to the people," she said.

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COMMENT
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17. (C) Although the political situation remains volatile, both sides seem to be treading very carefully for the moment. While clearly distrusting Kumaratunga, the PM sounded quite tentative, as if he was not sure what he wanted to do. Meanwhile, the president sounded relatively tame in her speech last night, not saying anything particularly provocative about the government. Given these reactions, it is possible that the two sides are taking a breather, perhaps trying to read the tea leaves before proceeding to next steps. This might be a positive for the government which has to get ready for the second round of talks with the Tigers beginning on October 31. That said, we expect the cohabitation roller coaster ride to continue its parlous journey.
END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS